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### Overseers of the Poor

In the report of the overseers of the poor in 1892, we find that "during the past year the Almshouse has received an organ from the ladies of the Episcopal Society and others, and religious services have been held weekly the past winter, at which, and at other times a lady had kindly volunteered to play the organ, a source of much enjoyment to inmates."

Between 1853 and 1900 the affairs of the Overseers of the Poor and related subjects seem to take up a third of the subject matter in the town's annual reports. Apparently during these years few were able to provide for old age, and in addition there was much more sickness, often prolonged. Some years ago I looked over the causes of death as listed in the vital statistics for this period and copied off over 100 that seemed unusual, particularly when one considers that in a death report today the exact cause must be given in proper scientific terminology. Here are a few:

Fell from a load of hay; drowned in Boston Harbor; burnt, clothes took fire; caught in the draw of a shingle mill; fell out of row boat; Paris green; killed by a horse; instant suicide; killed by the cars; found that way in a barn; exhausted mentally; no definite decess.

This has nothing to do with the overseers of the poor, but again think of the information given when a dog is licensed: breed, sex, age, color. At the time I was listing causes of death I was intrigued by the facts relative to dogs "registered, numbered, described and licensed between 1859 and 1871." So we might as well have a few of these to bring in a more cheerful subject:

One hound, spotted with a red head; one light red dog; one white curly dog; one 3-legged light yellow dog; one large black and white dog; one small dog.

Then, apparently, authorities got fussier and we have one large brown and white spotted male dog named "Dash"; one white hound with yellow ears, large black spots across back; one medium sized tan color dog named Tom Nogs; one red spayed female lion (probably dog's name); one yellow dog 4 month's old named Granpar; one yellow terrier named Santa Claus a year old.

To go back to the Overseers of the Poor, we find their principal concern to be the Almshouse, first a square Colonial situated on the west side of Dept St. which also served as the town office building. It was destroyed by fire in 1895. In 1895 it was voted to build a new one on the same site at a cost of not over \$5,000. The average number of inmates was about 10. There was much charitable work done outside at the town's expense. The Almshouse was nearly always supervised by a married couple, some farm produce raised on the grounds by the keeper with help from younger inmates. A problem of considerable magnitude, however, came from one report referred to as "hoards of tramps." The

greatest number being 438 lodged and fed during the year ending March 15, 1877 at an estimated cost of \$74.76. The problem was eased somewhat by the construction of a "tramp house" in which to keep the unwelcome visitors locked up during the night time.

It was eased much more by the passage of the "Tramp Act of 1880," Chapter 257 of the General Laws, which provided that a tramp could be arrested without a warrant and given not over 30 days in jail. And if he gets tough or displays a dangerous weapon, not less than one nor more than 20 year. After the passage of this legislation

there was a marked decrease in the number of tramps cared for. The first year following there were only 4, a decrease of 320 from the year previous. However, there was a gradual failure to enforce the law and a growing tendency of tramps to ignore it with the result that in the following 20 years the number rose to about half the former numbers.

In 1898 the Town instructed the overseers of the poor to enforce the law in regard to tramps.

As to the effect of all this on the Almshouse, we find the following in the report of the Overseers of the Poor dated March 1, 1877:

"Entertaining 438 tramps during the year has given the matron of the house much trouble, work and anxiety."

Her total pay was board and lodging, while her husband, the keeper, received a salary of \$300 and was found fault with for entertaining friends during the evening at the town's expense. Also, for entrusting one of the better seeming tramps with the duty of locking up all others when called for and allowing him to work about the place for board and room, thus driving one of the town's own citizens from the chance to get paid for the same work. It came out all right in the end.

### Almshouse Burns

(A Duxbury news dispatch of Dec. 8, 1896):

"The Almshouse was burned Sunday night. About 12:30 fire was discovered in a portion of the building used for a workshop and a tramp room, neither being occupied at that time. What wind there was blew the flames toward the main building, and as there is no fire department or apparatus here it was soon burning throughout. There were 6 inmates who were all gotten out safely. Nothing on the upper floors was saved, but part of the furniture on Hand extinguishers, such as are now being put in factories in Plymouth and neighboring towns, saved the barn and other buildings. Supplies of the school committee and some of the selectmen's documents and books were burned. How the fire started is unknown. The building was a large wooden structure situated not far from South Duxbury railroad station and it was built many years ago.